

07/06/21 Tuesday

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Iran Hails 'Good Progress' in Second Talks With Rival Saudi Arabia, But 'Complexities' Remain by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Iran and Saudi Arabia, which have postured as leaders of the world's Shiite and Sunni Muslim communities, respectively, recently held a second round of negotiations in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad aimed at repairing their damaged relations, which have been broken since 2016. They come as Washington looks to change its Middle East policy.

"Good progress has been achieved in these talks ... In some cases, disputes may have complexities that take time to resolve," Iranian government spokesperson [Ali Rabei told reporters](#) at a Tuesday press conference in Tehran.

The talks have so far mostly focused on Yemen, in which Saudi Arabia and its allies, including the Yemeni government-in-exile, have been waging war against the Zaidi Shiite movement Ansarallah, also known as the Houthis, since 2015. Tehran has given its political support to the Houthis, but the extent to which it might have materially supported the movement has never been adequately demonstrated. Nearly half a million people have died in the war, mostly due to a Saudi blockade and the destruction of infrastructure.

"We still believe that dialogue, especially among the societies of the Muslim Ummah, is the only decent solution in resolving their differences," Rabei said, using the Arabic word for the worldwide Muslim community.

"We understand that the differences in some cases might be complicated and settling them needs time," he added.

Iran cut off relations with Riyadh in 2016 after the Saudis [executed Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr](#), a prominent Shiite cleric and fierce critic of the Saudi government, which adheres to Sunni Wahhabism. Saudi Arabia's Shiite minority is heavily oppressed and mostly live in Eastern Province, where Saudi military elements have been deployed against anti-government protests since the Arab Spring movement in 2011, in which al-Nimr was a leading figure.

The first round of negotiations began in May and were preceded by [a secret meeting](#) between Saudi intelligence chief Khalid al-Humaidan and Esmail Qa'ani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force the previous month. Qa'ani's predecessor, Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, was assassinated by the United States in January 2020 while [reportedly pursuing similar](#) high-level talks mediated by the Iraqi government.

Iraqi President Barham Salih has presented his country, which is just one of three nations with a Shiite majority - the other two are Iran and Azerbaijan - as well-situated to make peace between the two rivals.

"For Iraq to be able to play that convenient role between these regional actors is important," [Salih said after](#) the first round of talks in May. "The theme is that a stable, sovereign Iraq is a common interest of our neighbors. Instead of Iran being a source of instability, let it be the common, binding theme for bringing the region together."

The talks are the first since Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's conservative chief justice, won presidential elections last month. He is due to take office in August. Raisi has said he [supports mending ties](#) with Riyadh, saying, "There are no obstacles from Iran's side to re-opening embassies... there are no obstacles to ties with Saudi Arabia."

"From our perspective, foreign policy in Iran is in any case run by the supreme leader and therefore we base our interactions and our approach to Iran on the reality on the ground, and that is what we will judge the new government on, regardless of who is in charge," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan [Al Saud said](#) on June 22.

Flurry of Regional Negotiations

Iran isn't the only country Riyadh has sought to patch up relations with: in January, Saudi Arabia and four of its regional allies agreed to [end the blockade](#) against Qatar, which was imposed in 2017. The quintet had accused Doha of simultaneously supporting the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, which both Riyadh and Cairo consider a terrorist organization, as well as of being too close to Iran. Qatar and Iran share a massive offshore oil field in the Persian Gulf, but the kingdom also hosts the forward headquarters of US Central Command, meaning its relationship with Tehran has strict limits.

However, the talks have also come as several Gulf nations made peace with Israel last year, which both Iran and Saudi Arabia refuse to recognize, but with which the Saudis have long maintained an informal relationship. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates both took part in the US-coordinated Abraham Accords, which Sudan and Morocco also later joined, [drawing condemnation](#) from other Muslim nations.

Biden Changes US' Regional Focus

The talks have come in the wake of a change of administration in Washington, where US President Joe Biden has begun to plot a different course for regional policy than that of his predecessor, Donald Trump, who was strongly supportive of Saudi Arabia and initiated a "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran after torpedoing a 2015 peace deal.

- The US will participate in discussions in Vienna to try to save the international agreement on Iranian nuclear power. However, they will not be at the same table as Tehran and it is the Europeans who will serve as intermediaries between the two parties, in the hope of achieving concrete results after two months of impasse.

Biden has [restarted negotiations](#) on returning to that deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which lowered sanctions against Iran in exchange for Iran accepting tight restrictions on its nuclear program that prevented it from obtaining a nuclear weapon. Iran denies it aims for a weapon, but has stepped back from its commitments under the peace deal after the US reimposed sanctions strangling its economy.

On the other side, Biden has condemned Riyadh's war in Yemen - although he stopped short of ending support for the Saudi military, a major US partner - and his administration has declassified intelligence reports on the 2018 assassination of Saudi dissident [journalist Jamal Khashoggi](#) that point the finger at Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, who has denied any direct involvement in the murder. However, Biden's administration has also condemned Houthi attacks into Saudi Arabia, which have targeted Saudi military and petroleum infrastructure.

Biden has also pulled some troops out of Saudi Arabia and is overseeing the final withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan as part of a peace deal with the Taliban arrived at by the Trump administration.

The withdrawals are part of a larger [shift in Pentagon strategy](#) aimed at “inter-state strategic competition” with Russia and China, although in that policy, Iran remains an important but secondary focus.

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France Pledges More Support for Chad's Military Junta as Leader Makes 'Friendship' Visit to Paris

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

French President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday pledged to increase aid to Chad after that country's interim leader, Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno, said it would be needed in order to achieve the internationally-mandated 18-month transition to democratic rule following the death of his father in April.

Macron said Tuesday after two days of meetings with Deby Itno at the Palais de l'Élysée in Paris that “everything should be done to achieve the objectives of an inclusive, peaceful and successful transition in line with the provisions laid out by the African Union.”

Deby Itno, who heads the so-called Military Transition Council that seized power following the death of his father, Idris Deby, in battle in April, has pledged to hold “free and transparent” elections within 18 months, but warned that without international help the transitional process [could take longer](#).

Deby Itno left N'Djamena for Paris on Sunday on what his government described as “a visit of friendship and work,” according to [Africa News](#).

Before he was killed in battle with rebels outside the capital on April 20, Idris Deby had ruled the Sahelian nation for 30 years with the support of France, who got a reliable ally in central Africa out of the partnership. Chad was once a colony of France, and Paris has continued to involve itself in Chadian politics since its formal departure in 1960. Most recently, the capital of N'Djamena served as the headquarters of [Operation Barkhane](#), Paris' War on Terror-style campaign against Islamist groups across the Sahel.

After Deby's death, the military decided within hours to form a transitional council and place the 37-year-old Deby Itno, a veteran of the Barkhane campaign, at the head. [As Sputnik reported](#) at the time, this was done in violation of the Chadian constitution's outlined path for succession.

The day of Deby's funeral, Macron declared France was [an “unwavering” friend](#) of Chad, throwing his weight behind Deby Itno's junta. Then in June, Macron announced the end of Barkhane after another coup in Mali ousted a civilian-led transitional government. However, it is likely Macron used the coup [as an excuse](#) to end an unpopular war as he begins his re-election campaign for elections next year. He also recently pulled French troops out of the [Central African Republic](#), which European parliamentarians have recently said did little to improve that country's military after five years of training.

Macron has long sought to [shift the burden](#) of fighting terrorist and insurgent groups to local governments, and encouraged the G5 Sahel nations - all former French colonies - to continue the fight after French troops leave. [US Africa Command](#) has adopted a similar policy, training local surrogate forces under its 127-Echo program to take the place of US troops so they can be shifted to the Indo-Pacific as part of Washington's "great power competition" strategy against Russia and China.

However, while much of the 5,100-strong Barkhane force will soon leave Africa, several hundred French troops will remain in West Africa as part of the Takuba Task Force, a special operations group hunting Islamist groups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Macron hailed Deby Itno's decision on Tuesday to "continue the fight against terrorist groups, both bilaterally and in multilateral commitments" with the Takuba Task Force and the European Union's Common Security and Defense Policy (PSDC).

Macron also spoke on Tuesday of a "quick treatment of Chadian debt" under the G20 common framework. Chad asked the International Monetary Fund to [restructure its debt](#) in January, the first nation to do so after the G20 agreed to a new streamlined system. At the time of its request, N'Djamena's public or publicly guaranteed debt was \$2.8 billion, or 25.6% of its gross domestic product.

Half of that debt is oil-backed and [owed to Glencore](#), an Anglo-Swiss multinational that operates several oil fields in southern Chad and which also bailed out the Chadian government in 2018.

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Bloomberg Claims 'Cozy Bear' Hacker Group Breached RNC During Keseya Attack, RNC Denies Breach
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A report published by Bloomberg citing anonymous sources "familiar with the matter" claims that Russian hackers said to be behind the 2016 hacking of the Democratic National Committee and the SolarWinds hack revealed in 2020 are also responsible for a recent ransomware attack on the Republican National Committee.

According to the Tuesday [Bloomberg report](#), the hack attack was perpetrated by "APT29" or "Cozy Bear," a hacker group US intelligence claims is linked to the Russian government, despite denials from Moscow of any association. Both names are designations for the group used by cybersecurity experts to identify what they called an "advanced persistent threat" and not names the group uses for itself.

The attack allegedly happened at the same time as a massive attack on dozens of organizations on July 3 by a hacking group called REvil, a cybercrime syndicate with a reputation for ransomware attacks. The hack, which targeted more than 200 companies that use Kaseya VSA, an IT management tool, used ransomware to [demand \\$70 million](#) in bitcoin, according to the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.

A spokesperson for the RNC told Reuters that after an investigation, the committee had concluded no RNC data had been accessed in the hack. Earlier, Bloomberg was referred to a previous statement on Saturday:

"Microsoft informed us that one of our vendors, Synnex, systems may have been exposed," RNC spokesperson Mike [Reed told Bloomberg](#) at the time. "There is no indication the RNC was hacked or any RNC information was stolen. We are investigating the matter and have informed DHS and the FBI."

Russia's embassy in the United States has also denied reports about the alleged breach of the RNC computer systems by "Russian government hackers."

"We paid attention to the publication by Bloomberg on July 6 about the alleged breach by 'Russian government hackers' of the computer systems of the Republican National Committee. We strongly reject such fabrications. We emphasize that the party itself denied the fact of a cyber attack. There is no evidence that the attack took place," the embassy said.

"In this regard, we urge the journalists to recall professional ethics and stop sweeping accusations. We would like to remind that during the summit of the presidents of Russia and the United States in Geneva, the topic of cybersecurity took one of the central places," the embassy said on Facebook.

"An agreement was reached to resume expert dialogue on this important topic. We are confident that a professional discussion of all issues related to cyberspace, will allow specialists to jointly improve the security of the information infrastructure of our countries. Unsolicited accusations based on the testimony of some anonymous sources only spoil such work," it said. US intelligence also accused Cozy Bear in December 2020 of [breaking the Orion management](#) software made by SolarWinds, giving the hackers access to the data of more than 200 major organizations around the globe, both government and corporate, and of helping another group designated "Fancy Bear" to hack into the DNC in 2016 and steal thousands of emails by top-level Democratic Party officials. The identity of the hackers has never been verified, nor have their alleged connections to Russian intelligence.

REvil Ransomware Attack in Parallel

Kaseya has said the REvil attack never posed a threat to any critical US infrastructure and the hackers [only actually breached](#) less than 60 of its customers, impacting "fewer than 1,500 downstream businesses." The US government has made no official statement about assigning blame, but US President Joe [Biden initially said](#) his administration is "not sure yet." On Tuesday, he said that he had received a update from his national security team and would have more to say in the coming days.

"It appears to have caused minimal damage to U.S. businesses, but we're still gathering information," he told reporters.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said that senior Russian and American officials would discuss the hack at a meeting next week.

"We expect to have a meeting next week focused on ransomware attacks," Psaki said Tuesday.

"If the Russian government cannot or will not take action against criminal actors residing in Russia we will take action, or reserve the right to take action, on our own."

The US intelligence community has long accused hackers of being based in Russia and of being tools of the Russian government, including meddling in US elections in 2016, 2018, and

2020, and the SolarWinds hack. However, it has never produced evidence of such a link, or given the Russian government evidence of the criminals' identities in order to prosecute them. "We here in the Russian Federation have - cyber crimes that have increased - many times over in the last few years," Russian President [Vladimir Putin told NBC](#) in an interview last month. "We're trying to respond to it. We're looking for cyber criminals. If we find them, we punish them. We are willing to engage with international participants, including the United States. You are the ones who have refused to engage in joint work. What can we do? We cannot build - this work, we cannot structure this work unilaterally."

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Photos: China's Type 003 Super Carrier Takes Final Shape at Shanghai Shipyard as Launch Date Nears
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Already larger than the US Navy, China's People's Liberation Army Navy is steadily replacing older warships with advanced vessels, including a powerful new missile cruiser class, amphibious assault ships, and a new super carrier.

New photos of Jiangnan shipyard in the Chinese port city of Shanghai show that the country's newest aircraft carrier, the as-yet-unnamed Type 003, is nearing completion after the flight deck and command island were recently installed. The warship is expected to become the world's largest aircraft carrier outside the US Navy.

The photos show that in recent weeks the carrier's angled flight deck has been installed above the hull and the distinctive command island has been lowered onto it, giving a broad impression of what the warship's final appearance and dimensions will be.

According to [Naval News](#), the Type 003 will be 1,050 feet long, about 43 feet shorter than the US Navy's newest carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford, and with a slightly narrower flight deck. However, due to some minor design differences, including having two aircraft elevators instead of three, the Chinese carrier will have a slightly larger flight deck surface area of 209,904.9 square feet (19,500.8 square meters).

However, like the Ford, the Type 003 will launch aircraft using one of three electromagnetic aircraft launch systems (EMALS), giving it the ability to launch [larger aircraft](#) with heavier fuel and weapons loads than other Chinese carriers, which use a more reliable, but less flexible method of launching planes off a bow ramp.

One of those aircraft is anticipated to be revealed soon by Shenyang Aircraft Corporation: a carrier-based fighter provisionally called the J-35 by Western observers, which is believed to be [based on the FC-31](#). Shenyang has been testing for years. A fifth-generation stealth aircraft, the FC-31 is considered broadly comparable to the US military's F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, two of the three versions of which are capable of operating from aircraft carriers.

However, no formal announcement has yet been made about [the so-called J-35](#), despite the appearance of aircraft models similar to the FC-31 at a carrier mock-up in Wuhan.

More immediately, Shenyang appears to have [produced another batch](#) of J-15 “Flying Shark” fighters, a carrier-based jet with a shared ancestry to the J-11B and Russia’s Su-33 fighter. The large aircraft has not reached its full potential flying from China’s two other carriers, Liaoning and Shandong, which use bow ramps.

Both carriers are smaller than the Type 003 and closely related to Russia’s flagship aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov. The PLAN also has [one Hainan-class](#) landing helicopter dock in service and two more being finished. The warships resemble aircraft carriers, but carry helicopters and amphibious landing craft.

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Elsa Nears Hurricane Strength Once Again as Storm Intensifies Ahead of Florida Landfall
Octavio Jones
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, tropical storm Elsa was declared the first hurricane of the 2021 season after registering powerful sustained winds that saw the cyclone reach a Category 1 classification on the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale. It was later downgraded back to a tropical storm a day later.

Tropical storm Elsa is on the verge of being reclassified a hurricane as the growing cyclone has begun to intensify in the Gulf of Mexico before its looming landfall in southern Florida on Wednesday, the National Hurricane Center (NHC) has revealed.

In the latest [Tuesday advisory](#) released by the hurricane agency, forecasters indicated that Elsa is located about 95 miles from Key West, Florida, with a maximum sustained wind speed of 70 miles per hour. Elsa may regain its [hurricane-status](#) once the cyclone manages to record a sustained wind speed that is in excess of 74 miles per hour.

At present, the cyclone is moving northward at a pace of 9 miles per hour, setting the storm up for a Wednesday landfall in South Florida. Elsa’s tropical storm-force winds are currently extending roughly 70 miles from the eye of the system.

Although forecasters have warned that Elsa is more than likely to become a hurricane before making landfall, the NHC has also stated the storm will be “weakening” quickly once it begins to move inland late on Wednesday.

Parts of Florida are expected to experience a storm surge of up to 5 feet, with rainfall across the state reaching between 2 inches and 5 inches. Authorities have issued storm surge warnings from Florida’s Bonita Beach to the Aucilla River.

“On the forecast track, Elsa will move near or over portions of the west coast of Florida later today [Tuesday] through tonight,” the agency’s Tuesday advisory reads. “Elsa is forecast to make landfall along the north Florida Gulf coast on Wednesday, and then move across the southeastern United States through Thursday.”

A five-day forecast released by the National Hurricane Center has Elsa leaving the Sunshine State and going into neighboring Georgia late Wednesday before washing over the Carolinas, Virginia and portions of Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey and Connecticut.

As Elsa moves its way north along the US East Coast, the system is forecasted to dump anywhere between 1 and 5 inches of rainfall. Isolated totals may hit up to 8 inches of rain. Aside from rain and potential flooding, residents living within Elsa's reach may also spot a "few tornadoes" as the system moves inland throughout Wednesday and Thursday.

US President Joe Biden [approved](#) an emergency declaration for Florida on Monday in anticipation of the destruction that the storm may bring to the state. Gov. Ron DeSantis (R-FL) declared a state of emergency ahead of Elsa on Saturday.

Over the weekend, Elsa barreled through much of the Caribbean and left the southern coasts of Haiti and the Dominican Republic battered, having prompted dozens of evacuations in the region. At least three people were declared dead as a result of the storm.

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Erbil Airport in Iraq Hosting US Troops Comes Under Rocket, Drone Attack - Reports
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The late Tuesday incident comes a day after at least one rocket fell near the al-Asad air base, an Iraqi military installation close to the Erbil International Airport that hosts US troops. At the time, military officials detailed that the incident did not cause significant damage as the explosive did not detonate.

The Erbil International Airport in Iraq was struck with a bevy of rocket and drone attacks late Tuesday, marking the latest incident in a spate of recent strikes in the area, security forces with the Kurdistan Region's Counterterrorism Directorate have detailed.

Unconfirmed estimates from militia-affiliated outlets suggest that at least 20 rockets were launched toward the airport. Reports have also indicated that the strike included the usage of three drones.

A [statement](#) released by the directorate details that the attack unfolded at roughly 10:30 p.m. local time, and that no structural damage was detected. It was also noted the strikes resulted in no fatalities. Although a fire did break out, it was promptly extinguished.

Details of the directorate's release were also [confirmed](#) by Col. Wayne Marotto, spokesperson for US' Operation Inherent Resolve mission in the region. The US military official also stated that an update would be issued once "further information" is obtained.

Video footage from the area captures emergency sirens blaring at the US Consulate.

The latest development comes just one day after officials revealed that a rocket was struck down over the US embassy in Baghdad, as well as rockets that were deployed toward the al-Asad air base, a nearby station that hosts US troops.

Late Sunday, the Pentagon said that US military aircraft had [struck facilities](#) of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada in the Syrian-Iraqi border region in response to attacks against American interests in Iraq. According to Syrian state television, the airstrikes likely left a child killed and three people injured.

In fact, since the start of 2021, US-led coalition troops having been coming under fire in the area since mid-February, when multiple rocket attacks prompted two fatalities and over a dozen injuries.

Last June, a senior Iraqi military spokesperson said that Ayn Al Asad was the only air base in Iraq where the US-led coalition forces were still stationed after the Iraqi parliament's decision that all foreign troops must withdraw.

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Quiet Goodbyes - Cartoon

With the Biden administration having vowed to remove all US troops from Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, US officials recently announced removal efforts are more than 90% complete. Just over two months remain on the promised deadline. After nearly 20 years of occupying Afghanistan's strategic Bagram Airfield, US forces quietly departed the military installation without so much as giving a head's up to the base's incoming Afghan commander.

Gen. Mir Asadullah Kohistani, Bagram's new commander, [told](#) the Associated Press on Tuesday that Afghan military officials were not informed of the US departure from the base, and had only discovered the development more than two hours after troops quietly left the airfield. "We [heard] some rumor that the Americans had left Bagram ... and finally by seven o'clock in the morning, we understood that it was confirmed that they had already left Bagram," Kohistani told the outlet, detailing that American forces left behind a treasure trove of supplies that ranged from ready-to-eat meals to armored vehicles.

Another soldier relayed to the publication that US forces had called their Afghan counterparts from the airport in nearby Kabul to confirm that they had indeed pulled out from the base. It was also reported that within 20 minutes of the US pullout, electricity at the base was shuttered, effectively serving as a free-for-all sign to nearby thieves. By the time Afghan soldiers arrived at the base, they had to run off of a "small army of looters," according to the AP.

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Targeted Killings: Deaths of Journalists on the Rise Amid Press Freedom Instability
by [Asya Geydarova](#), [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Figures compiled by the Committee to Protect Journalists states that more than 2,000 journalists and media employees have been killed in the line of duty since 1992, of which motives have been confirmed for approximately 1,520 cases. In 2021, 14 such individuals were killed.

The targeted killings of journalists have remained on the rise across the globe as the media profession continues to become increasingly dangerous for individuals seeking to shed light on the criminal underbelly.

The alarming occurrence has more recently been underscored with the shooting of Dutch journalist Peter R. de Vries, who was [attacked](#) earlier Tuesday when he was exiting the studio of Dutch broadcaster RTL in downtown Amsterdam.

Unconfirmed reports have suggested that de Vries was targeted as a result of his past investigative work, considering the Dutch crime reporter previously revealed he received a bevy of threats from criminals, more recently by alleged Moroccan-Dutch criminal Ridouan Taghi. Taghi, who is currently being held in a maximum-security prison in the Netherlands, is at the center of a murder case in which de Vries serves as counselor to state witness Nabil B. The hot-button case previously saw the witness' past lawyer killed in public in September 2019. As expected, the shooting has brought newfound light to the life-threatening hurdles that journalists and media professionals deal with while trying to sift and analyze investigative pieces.

"Another courageous journalist targeted by organised crime," [tweeted](#) Afron Jones, former Police and Crime Commissioner for North Wales Police, UK.

Following the attack on de Vries, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has [called on Dutch authorities](#) to "swiftly and thoroughly investigate the shooting of crime reporter Peter R. de Vries, determine if he was targeted for his work, and ensure that those responsible face justice".

Journalist Christoph Schwaiger [remarked](#) on Twitter earlier that de Vries' shooting emphasizes that "Europe is still not a safe place for journalists," especially following the murders of investigative journalists [Daphne Caruana Galizia](#) and [Ján Kuciak](#) in 2017 and 2018, respectively.

Investigative journalist Caruana Galizia was killed after a bomb went off in her car. Her death was linked to an anti-corruption investigation she was conducting with the help of information uncovered in the leaked Panama Papers. The assassination caused a major backlash and led to a political crisis in the island nation resulting in the resignation of its then prime minister. Slovak investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kusnirova were murdered in February 2018 in retaliation for investigating alleged links between senior Slovak politicians and organized crime syndicates.

The murder of Kuciak and Kusnirova shocked Slovakia, and led to the largest public demonstrations since 1989. Investigations into the connections of figures engaged in the shadow economy with major politicians and employees of the special services and police began in Slovakia after their murder.

The 2018 death of Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi also brought to the forefront the perils of the journalism industry, especially in cases in which reporters are using their platform to shed light on the corruption within powerful entities.

'Work-Related Incidents'?

Thirty-five journalists around the world were killed in the first half of this year, the Geneva-based Press Emblem Campaign (PEC) said on Tuesday. The same death toll was registered in the first half of the previous year, while the annual tally stood at 92.

The majority of the deceased journalists were targeted intentionally, with terrorist groups being behind almost a third of the casualties, the organization specified.

An annual report released by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in mid-March found that some 65 reporters and media staffers were killed in 2020 as a result of "work-related incidents," up from 17 cases the previous year.

The report cited organized crime groups, extremists and sectarian violence as the main reasons for the lingering lack of security for journalists, with Mexico listed as one of the [worst countries](#) for press freedom. The US' southern neighbor reported the highest death toll of reporters in 2020: 14.

"The ruthless reign of crime barons in Mexico, the violence of extremists in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Somalia, as well as the intolerance of hardliners in India and the Philippines have contributed to the continued bloodshed in the media," IFJ General Secretary Anthony Bellanger said in a [statement](#) accompanying the report, which also listed the names of jailed or imprisoned journalists.

"No democracy worthy of that name can jail messengers of freedom of expression. Every day, the IFJ works actively on the ground for the immediate and unconditional release of colleagues who are unjustly imprisoned."

Similarly, an annual report filed by media advocacy group Reporters Without Borders in late 2020 detailed the deaths of at least 50 journalists who were killed for their choice of profession. The cases involved many of whom were murdered at close range or died as a result of a planted bomb.

As recent as June 29, authorities in Haiti [reported](#) that an investigation had been launched to determine whether Haitian journalist Diego Charles was killed outside his home as a result of his work.

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LA Man Charged for Trafficking 16 Tons of Fireworks After LAPD's Botched Detonation
by [Evan Craighead](#)

At least 17 people were injured in South Los Angeles, California, last week after a bomb squad with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) failed to properly dispose of homemade fireworks seized from an area resident. Law enforcement officials claim they followed protocol, but have yet to determine why their armored containment vehicle exploded.

South Los Angeles resident Arturo Ceja III is set to appear in court on Tuesday, shortly after he was arrested by agents with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), and federally charged for the illegal transportation of fireworks and "dangerous homemade devices."

Feds claim Ceja, 26, made multiple trips to Nevada late last month to purchase "various types of explosives," such as fireworks and "aerial displays."

The bulk of the LA man's transactions took place at Area 51 Fireworks - a vendor in Pahrump, Nevada.

According to court documents, Nevada fireworks fetch four times their cost in the California market.

"Ceja did not possess an ATF explosives license or permit of any kind that would authorize him to transport either aerial display fireworks or homemade fireworks made with explosive materials, including but not limited to flash powder," the ATF complaint detailed, claiming the makeshift fireworks were being unsafely stored by a grill in his backyard.

After receiving a tip, authorities descended on the Ceja's LA home last Wednesday and discovered what was estimated to be some 5,000 pounds (2,268 kilograms) of explosives. However, ATF agents investigating the matter later claimed around 32,000 pounds of allegedly trafficked fireworks and explosives were stored at his home.

As authorities seized the fireworks and explosives from the 26-year-old's residence, members of the LAPD bomb squad determined that some of the items were unsafe to transport, and should be detonated at the scene to manage risks. Ceja's 10-year-old brother was home when LAPD officers arrived, according to court documents.

Though the team brought a total containment vessel (TCV) to assist with on-scene detonation, [the vessel ultimately exploded](#), as seen by viral footage.

The blast, which covered a wide radius, damaged homes, cars and injured at least 17 individuals, including law enforcement officers. Michael Hoffman, a special agent with the ATF, revealed on Friday that a 500-pound explosive container was recovered three to four blocks away - in "somebody's yard."

The 26-year-old is now in federal custody and faces up to 10 years behind bars for charges related to child endangerment and possession of a destructive device.

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Three Suspects Arrested, Journo Peter R de Vries 'Fighting For His Life' After Headshot in Amsterdam
by [Evan Craighead](#)

According to Dutch media, citing sources, the journalist was shot five times when he left the RTL studio, where he was invited to participate in a TV show.

Three suspects are now in custody after famed crime journalist Peter R de Vries was shot in the head at close range on a street in Amsterdam on Tuesday, police have confirmed.

"Peter R de Vries was shot on the Lange Leidsedwardsstraat tonight. He was taken to hospital with serious injuries. The police have launched a large-scale investigation," local authorities [said via Twitter](#).

The 64-year-old crime journalist was attacked by the unknown gunman at Leidseplein Square around 7:30 p.m. local time.

Video evidence, as well as eyewitness statements, were taken at the scene by law enforcement officials.

"At this point, all we know is that he is seriously injured and is fighting for his life," said Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema. "Our hearts and condolences go out to his family, relatives and friends."

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte also commented on the shooting, labeling the incident "shocking and incomprehensible."

"It was an attack on a courageous journalist and also an attack on the free press that is so critical to our democracy," Rutte declared. "We are praying that he will survive."

De Vries, famous for his independent crime journalism, asserted in 2019 that he was still on the hit list of suspected organized crime boss Ridouan Taghi, who was arrested in Dubai later that year and remains in a maximum-security prison in the southern Netherlands town of Vught.

"The only thing I can do now is to publicize this," De Vries [told the Telegraaf](#).

At the time, the crime journalist theorized that then-fugitive Taghi - who has been linked to a number of assassinations - wanted to murder him over statements.

De Vries' allegations prompted the suspected crime boss to issue a rebuttal, [claiming that authorities and the judiciary system](#) were "lying."

"As a boy I have always been very interested in watching your TV program," Taghi asserted in May 2019, referring to "Peter R. de Vries: Crime Reporter" ("Peter R. de Vries, misdaadverslaggever"), De Vries' investigative television program that focused on high-profile criminals. The show ran from 1995 until 2012.

"I am relieved and I tend to believe this," the journalist said in his response, months before Taghi was arrested.

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Taliban Flaunt US-Made Weaponry Seized From Afghan Forces Amid Coalition Withdrawal by [Evan Craighead](#)

US Central Command (CENTCOM) announced on Tuesday that the US military has completed more than 90% of its withdrawal process from Afghanistan. The July 6 release also noted that the US has officially transferred seven facilities to the Afghan Ministry of Defense.

As most US forces seek to remove all US troops from Afghanistan, the [Taliban's influence continues to flourish](#) in the region, from the seizure of US-made, Afghan weapons, to the capturing of districts.

Taliban forces at the recently-captured Sultan Khil military base in Afghanistan's Wardak Province invited Sky News to their strategic facility, shortly after engaging with Afghan soldiers for two days.

A Taliban commander revealed to the British outlet that militants acquired a number of weapons and military equipment from the government forces: 70 sniper rifles; 900 guns; 30 Humvees; 20 military pickup trucks; and 15 articulated military trucks.

Many of the Afghan military items seized by Taliban forces were emblazoned with "Property of USA Government," according to the outlet.

The battle in question was just one of many that occurred in northern Afghanistan over the past several days. [Per the Associated Press](#), the Taliban controls a third of Afghanistan's 421 districts and district centers.

"Unfortunately, the majority of the districts were left to [the] Taliban without any fight," said Mohib-ul Rahman, a council member in the northeastern Badakhshan province.

Citing poor morale and low government forces, Rahman said that, of the 10 districts that fell to the Taliban, eight were captured without a fight.

Overall, 195 Afghan districts (49%) are under Taliban control. At least 120 districts have been captured by the militants since May 1, according to estimates by the [Long War Journal](#).

The Afghan government's security issues have been compounded in recent months due to the ongoing pullout of US forces from the area.

As of this article's publication, more than 90% of the pullout has been completed, [according to CENTCOM](#).

Though the US military is slated to complete its withdrawal by September 11, the unified combatant command noted in its [Tuesday news release](#) that no further percentages regarding the pullout will be published in the future.

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US Embargo Prevents Cuba From Acquiring Over 30 Crucial Vaccine Supplies - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, July 6 (Sputnik) - The United States trade embargo imposed against Cuba has hampered the island nation's ability to produce coronavirus vaccines as it was unable to obtain more than 30 pieces of supplies necessary for running the clinical trials, Cuban Permanent Representative to the United Nations Pedro Luis Pedroso Cuesta told Sputnik. Pedroso said Cuba's health sector lost more than \$198.3 million between April and December of 2020 due to the United States economic blockade against his nation.

"During the period under review, the country was unable to obtain a total of 32 pieces of equipment and supplies, related to the production of vaccines candidates against COVID-19 or the conduct of stages necessary for the completion of the clinical trials, including equipment for the purification of the vaccines candidate, accessories for production equipment, filtration tanks, and capsules, potassium chloride solution, thimerosal, bags and reagents," Pedroso said. The ambassador explained that Cuba's health industry has been significantly challenged by shortages of essential products as the country faces difficulties in procuring supplies needed for drug manufacturing.

Under the so-called Cuban Democracy Act of 1992, foreign-based subsidiaries of US companies are prohibited from selling their products to Cuba.

Due to the US restrictions, Cuba had to resort to other intermediaries during the pandemic, leading to increase in prices of 60 percent as it was impossible to sign direct contract with the manufacturer, Pedroso said.

"This had an impact on the work of several institutions in the biopharmaceutical sector in Cuba, including the Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology [and] the Finlay Vaccine Institute,... directly involved in the country's efforts to tackle the pandemic," he said. Despite the economic blockade, Cuba has supported some 40 countries in their COVID-19 response and currently has five vaccine candidates for development, Pedroso added.

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US Allegations of Cuba Human Trafficking Dishonest, Offensive - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, July 6 (Sputnik) - The new report by the US State Department alleging that Havana has profited from exploiting its citizens through forced labor abroad is dishonest and represents offense to Cuba's health workers, Cuban Ambassador to the United Nations Pedro Luis Pedroso Cuesta told Sputnik.

Last week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken presented a report claiming that Cuba, among other nations, does not do enough to combat trafficking in persons. In particular, the report accused Cuba of running forced labor export programs, specifically its foreign medical missions program.

"State Secretary Blinken's trafficking in persons allegations [versus] Cuba are a new repeated chapter of aggression against our people. It is also a dishonest and an offense to Cuba's health staff," Pedroso said. "They are a brazen repetition of the lies fabricated under the Trump administration to justify the aggression. They are evidence of political corruption."

The former administration of US President Donald Trump has previously raised the labor export programs issue. The allegations were repeatedly refuted by Cuba, which has sent 57 medical teams to support 40 countries during the coronavirus pandemic.

The inclusion of Cuba in the annual "Trafficking in Persons Report" and placing it in Tier 3 - the worst category - could lead to the introduction of new sanctions and restrictions on access to international assistance.

Afghanistan, Algeria, China, Comoros, Cuba, Eritrea, Guinea Bissau, Iran, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nicaragua, North Korea, Russia, South Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan and Venezuela are also classified under Tier 3 in this year's State Department report.

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Trump Cuba Policy Repeatedly Hampered Aid Arrival Amid Pandemic - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, July 6 (Sputnik) - The restrictive measures against Cuba imposed by the former Trump administration have obstructed the arrival of humanitarian aid in the island nation during the coronavirus pandemic, Cuban Ambassador to the United Nations Pedro Luis Pedroso Cuesta told Sputnik.

Over the last four years, the US government added 243 new economic sanctions to toughen the embargo on Cuba that has been in place for almost 60 years.

"The measures have repeatedly hampered the arrival of humanitarian aid in the country which, in the context of addressing the pandemic, is immoral and unjustifiable and highlights the blockade's criminal nature," Pedroso said.

The ambassador emphasized that the new restrictive measures have magnified the many challenges Cuba faces brought about by the coronavirus pandemic and its socio-economic, health and financial impacts.

"Think about how much [Cuba] could be advanced, if just some of these measures are removed, or if Cuba is removed from the US State Department's unilateral list of countries that allegedly sponsor terrorism," Pedroso said.

US restrictions on trade with Cuba date back to the island nation's communist revolution in the late 1950s and involve least a half dozen different US laws. President Barack Obama took steps to normalize bilateral relations, but many of those steps were reversed by the former administration of President Donald Trump.

Current President Joe Biden has promised that he would return Obama's policy on Cuba but has yet to reverse the previous administration's steps after nearly six months in office.

On June 23, the United States voted against a UN General Assembly resolution condemning the embargo on Cuba that was adopted by the overwhelming majority of 184 other nations.

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End of US Blockade to Let Cuba Update Infrastructure, Turn to Clean Energy - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, July 6 (Sputnik) - The lifting of the US economic blockade imposed on Cuba almost 60 years ago could allow Havana to modernize its infrastructure and switch to renewable energy in less than five years, Cuban Ambassador to the United Nations Pedro Luis Pedroso Cuesta said in an interview with Sputnik.

Pedroso noted the losses Cuba has sustained during nearly six decades of the United States imposing the economic embargo amount to more than \$147,8 million.

"If Cuba had the payment capacity it lost to the embargo, in less than five years, the country could go a long way towards bringing much of its infrastructure up to date and could, in particular, change the national energy mix in favor of renewable energy sources," Pedroso said. If the amount Cuba lost were available, it would also strengthen the confidence of foreign investors and creditors as well as increase the country's access to financial markets, Pedroso pointed out.

"Under the present conditions, the embargo represents a huge burden for the Cuban population and economy," he said.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has only complicated the situation, forcing Cuba to allocate a significant amount of money to swiftly secure the medical equipment to respond to the health crisis, Pedroso added.

In June, the Central Bank of Cuba moved to temporarily suspend cash deposits made in US dollars as a necessary step as the country's ability to deposit US dollar bills in banks abroad has been restricted due to the long-running US trade embargo.

The former administration of US President Donald Trump intensified the trade embargo in place since 1962 by adding 243 new coercive measures against the Cuban government over four years that remain in effect to this day.

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Rockets Hit Iraq Base Hosting US Troops, 2 Injured – Coalition

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – The Ain Al-Assad Air Base that hosts coalition troops in Iraq was targeted by 14 rockets resulting in two personnel sustaining minor injuries and other damage which is still being assessed, the Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) spokesman Col. Wayne Marotto said on Wednesday.

"Initial report: At approx. 12:30 PM local time, Ain Al-Assad Air Base was attacked by 14 rockets. The rockets landed on the base & perimeter. Force protection defensive measures were activated," Marotto said in a tweet. "Two personnel sustained minor injuries. Damage still [being] assessed. More details will be provided when become available."

Marotto added that the base, east of the Euphrates river in central Iraq, is co-located with Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish Peshmerga forces and that attacks endanger their lives as well. This is the second rocket attack on the Ain Al-Assad base this week alone. On Monday, the air base was hit by three rockets, resulting in no injuries or damage.

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Biden Admin Still Gathering Information on Haiti Assassination - White House

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - Washington is still assessing the assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moise that took place overnight, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"We're still gathering details, we are still gathering specifics. Of course, the embassy and the State Department will be in close touch," Psaki said, as cited by MSNBC.

Psaki called the incident a "horrific crime."

Moise was assassinated at his private residence by a group of unnamed gunmen. Moise's wife was also shot and subsequently succumbed to her wounds.

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RPT - Former NYPD Officers Say Gun Violence Emergency Declaration Will Not Solve Problem

NEW YORK, July 6 (Sputnik) - Two former New York Police Department (NYPD) officers told Sputnik they do not believe the state of emergency declared by Governor Andrew Cuomo to address rising gun violence would help improve the situation.

On Tuesday, Cuomo declared a state of emergency against gun violence in New York State similar to the coronavirus pandemic, with the governor also signing into law a bill that enables lawsuits against firearms manufacturers on the grounds that they are being a "public nuisance." "You can come up with all the programs in the world, if there's no punishment for carrying illegal firearm, we're going to continue to see the violence. It's as simple as that," retired NYPD Detective Sgt. Joseph Giacalone told Sputnik.

Giacalone was referring to the controversial bail reform which limited the number of crimes for which a bail can be set to mostly violent ones. The reform immediately sparked a backlash among the police community arguing the move would only increase violence.

John Jay College of Criminal Justice Police Science Professor Maria Haberfeld said she viewed the problem of gun violence in New York as one partially created by local politicians.

"As opposed to a medical epidemic, it is something that is partially the creation of local politicians. Making statements like rebuild police-community relationships, after a year and a half almost of anti-police statements made by politicians, including Governor Cuomo, it's a little bit laughable to me," Haberfeld said.

The underlying cause of gun violence is the decades-long problem of the youth's affiliation with gangs and it is something that cannot be easily eradicated, she said.

Addressing the root causes of the problem would involve positive engagement of police officers with young people on the streets aiming to deter them from getting involved in criminal behavior, Haberfeld also said.

Following anti-police sentiment promoted by politicians in New York over the past year, law enforcement has seen a large number of officers retiring or being reluctant to interact with individuals who carry arms, she added.

A wave of civil rights protests against police brutality swept through the United States throughout last summer following the death of George Floyd, an African American male, in the custody of US law enforcement officers in the state of Minnesota in late May.

Many prominent politicians in the United States joined some protesters calling for radical measures to address what they say is systemic violence, including defunding the police. In this light, the state of emergency declaration is unlikely to be effective in combating the problem, Haberfeld said.

"This is dramatic in terms of the statement, but what does it really mean?" she said.

Cuomo's action against gun violence comes as current President Joe Biden called for a national crime prevention policy to cut down on shootings.

Cuomo said more people died from shootings in New York over the July 4th weekend than of COVID-19: 51 shooting deaths compared to 13 deaths from the disease.

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RPT - Russia Likely to Help Bring Order to Parts of Afghanistan After Collapse - Ex-US Official

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - Russia and remnants of the Northern Alliance will likely help maintain a semblance of order in some portions of Afghanistan after Kabul collapses in the wake of the American troop exit, former senior adviser to the Acting US Defense Secretary, Army Colonel Doug Macgregor, told Sputnik.

On Tuesday, US Central Command said the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan was 90 percent complete. Last week, commanding General Austin Miller warned that Afghanistan might be on the path to civil war after Washington is done pulling out forces.

"Remnants of the former Northern Alliance will doubtlessly re-emerge with Moscow's help to preserve some semblance of order in the Western part of the country," Macgregor, a military historian and tactician, said when asked about what happens if the country slides into civil war. Macgregor said the prospects are "poor" that the Afghan government will be able to remain in power and avoid collapsing after the US exits.

The US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, Macgregor added, is long overdue as he argued when then-President Donald Trump decided to withdraw forces.

"[The] withdrawal is being quickly and efficiently accomplished," Macgregor said.

Neighboring Asian nations will act to protect their own interests directly and to prevent Islamist extremists operating from Afghanistan to spread uncontrollably across the region, Macgregor said.

"India will cooperate with Russia and Iran to contain the influence of the Sunni Islamist elements in Afghanistan and Pakistan. China will try to complete its transportation infrastructure through Pakistan and parts of Afghanistan provided the Chinese can be protected. If not, the Chinese will pick other routes," he said.

Russia will cooperate both with Central Asian governments and with Iran to prevent the Taliban from spreading their power and influence, Macgregor explained. He acknowledged that the Taliban has already crossed into Tajikistan where Russia has a military base.

"Moscow knows it must work with its Central Asian neighbors and Iran to actively contain the Sunni Islamist bacillus plus heroin industry in Afghanistan," he said.

The Biden administration should seek to work constructively with Moscow and Beijing in combined efforts to maintain stability in the region, Macgregor advised.

"Whether Washington assists in any meaningful way is unknown, but Washington should do so if possible. Washington is far more likely to be successful in reducing the criminality in Afghanistan by supporting others in the region if we cooperate," he said.

Macgregor was a successful combat commander in the 1991 Gulf War when his armored forces decisively defeated Iraq's Republican Guard in the Battle of 73 Easting.

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RPT - US Needs Research-Driven Community Intervention Programs to Combat Gun Violence - Advocate

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The United States needs to implement and scale up evidenced-based community intervention strategies in order to successfully combat the gun violence epidemic, LIVE FREE Campaign Director, Pastor Mike McBride, told Sputnik. On Tuesday, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo issued an executive order, the first of its kind, declaring gun violence a national emergency. He also signed into law a bill that enables lawsuits against firearms manufacturers on the grounds that they are being a "public nuisance."

"We have seen historically failed responses and courage and imagination are needed to scale up strategies," McBride said. "We have to focus on and implement research-driven efforts of gun violence prevention."

US Congress, McBride added, must release the \$5 billion investment in evidence-based community violence intervention that is part of a new government jobs plan. He said he and other advocates will continue to work with President Joe Biden and state governors to implement policy strategies to confront this public health crisis.

Over the Fourth of July holiday weekend, 233 died in gun-related incidents in 500 shootings in the United States, CNN reported citing data from the Gun Violence Archive. However, the numbers, while staggering, represent a 26 percent drop from the same weekend in the previous year.

McBride echoed statistics showing crime and violence decreasing over the last decade, and credited the scaling up and implementation of prevention strategies, ceasefire efforts and other programs.

"We saw a reduction but all this literally stopped because of COVID. We weren't able to continue violence intervention, targeted interruptions, outreach, intervention and healing work because of COVID," he said. "Oakland [California] was on track to see a 30 percent reduction on top of the 50 percent that we'd already seen."

McBride, lead pastor of The Way Christian Center in West Berkeley, California, said those in the wider society "have to approach this from the perspective of people enduring levels of grief, trauma and loss." McBride said the issue needs to be framed completely differently and looked at as a sympathetic/empathetic situation versus criminality and blame.

"I always start off by reminding people that we experienced a once-in-a-century global pandemic that had a significant impact on the Black community, even families. It affected Black leaders of churches, family members, elders and others where many of them were sick and died. The community is undergoing a ubiquity of tests and communal violence is just another weight," he said.

The LIVE FREE Campaign with Faith in Action is a movement led by hundreds of faith congregations throughout the United States committed to addressing gun violence and mass incarceration of young people of color.

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CORRECTION -US Restricts Air Travel to Belarus Effective Immediately - Final Order

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration restricted commercial air travel between the United States and Belarus effective immediately, the Department of Transportation revealed in a final order.

"This Order was submitted for review under 49 U.S.C. § 41307 on July 2, 2021. On July 6, 2021, we received notification that the President's designee, under Executive Order 12597 and implementing regulations, did not intend to disapprove the Department's Order," the final order said on Tuesday.

The document said the order is effective immediately upon this notification.

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Russia Likely to Help Bring Order to Parts of Afghanistan After Collapse - Ex-US Official

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Russian Tourist Attacked in Attempted Robbery in New York City - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - A 31-year-old Russian woman visiting New York City as a tourist was attacked in an attempted robbery and had to be hospitalized to treat severe cuts on the back of her head, CBS reported.

Surveillance video shows a Black man attack the Russian woman; she is thrown into a pole and onto the ground as he tries to take her purse.

The report on Tuesday said the incident happened on the night of June 26 in the Chelsea neighborhood in Manhattan.

Adriana Mariella, who lived near the area where the incident took place, hid the Russian woman and her friend in her building until police arrived, the report said.

Mariella told CBS she noticed the man came back to the scene of the crime for a possible second altercation.

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Former NYPD Officers Say Gun Violence Emergency Declaration Will Not Solve Problem

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Republican Party Says Reports of Breach by Russian State Actors Not True, No Data Accessed

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The US Republican Party says reports of a cybersecurity breach at the hands of an alleged Russian hacker group are unfounded.

Earlier on Tuesday, US media reported that hackers related to a criminal group known as APT 29 or Cozy Bear breached the computer systems of the US Republican National Committee (RNC).

"This is not true," Republican Party Communications Director Danielle Alvarez said via Twitter on Tuesday responding to the media reports.

RNC Chief of Staff Richard Walters added that party officials have been in contact with Microsoft and following an investigation it has been determined that "no RNC data was accessed." SYNEX, the third-party integration service through which the breach is alleged to have happened, said they are investigating the cyberattack along with Microsoft and a "leading third-party cybersecurity firm."

The US authorities had accused the Cozy Bear hackers in the past for allegedly breaching the Democratic National Committee as well as for hacking the SolarWinds systems.

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US Plans to Restrict Air Travel to Belarus on September 1 - Final Order

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The Department of Transportation said the order will go into effect 61 days after it was submitted for review, July 2, which schedules the measure to go into effect on September 1.

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"This is not true," Republican Party Communications Director Danielle Alvarez said via Twitter on Tuesday responding to the media reports.

RNC Chief of Staff Richard Walters added that party officials have been in contact with Microsoft, and following an investigation it has been determined that "no RNC data was accessed."

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Death Toll in Collapsed Florida Building Rises to 36 After 4 More Bodies Found - Mayor

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The death toll in the Surfside condominium building collapse has increased to 36 after four additional bodies were recovered from the rubble, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava told reporters.

"We have recovered four additional victims, the number of confirmed deaths is now 36," Cava said on Tuesday.

Cava also said 109 residents in the collapsed building are still unaccounted for.

The controlled demolition of the rest of the building took place at approximately on Monday morning local time (2:30 p.m. GMT) as officials raced to demolish the rest of the building before the arrival of Tropical Storm Elsa this week.

Surfside Vice Mayor Tina Paul told Sputnik over the weekend that the search-and-rescue operation at the site of the collapsed building could stretch for weeks.

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Pentagon Says No Casualties, Injuries After Bomb-Laden Drones Attack Erbil

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - No casualties or injuries occurred after drones equipped with explosives were used for an attack in the vicinity of Erbil in Iraq, a US Defense Department spokesperson said in a statement.

"We are aware of reporting of a UAS [drones] incident in the vicinity of Erbil, Iraq," the spokesperson said in a tweet on Tuesday. "At this time, initial reports indicate no structural damage, injuries or casualties."

Earlier in the day, media reported that multiple rockets and drones hit the Erbil airport in Kurdistan, which hosts American troops.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) -

IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT TALKS

* Russia calls for an immediate resumption of negotiations on the full restoration of the Iran nuclear agreement against the background of Tehran's intention to produce metallic uranium, Russia's Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov said on Tuesday.

* The three western European nations who are parties to the nuclear agreement - France, Germany and the United Kingdom - expressed concern over Iran's continuing enrichment of

uranium in light of the absence of a date for the next round of talks to restore the accord and urged Iran to abandon such activities.

US CYBERSECURITY

* President Joe Biden will convene officials from across the US government on Wednesday to discuss the issue of ransomware attacks and the strategic efforts to address such attacks, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

* US officials will meet with their Russian counterparts next week for expert-level talks on ransomware attacks, Psaki said.

* Biden said that he was updated on the recent ransomware attack against the IT management software company Kaseya minimal damage appears to have been caused.

AFGHANISTAN

* The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan is now 90 percent complete, the Central Command (CENTCOM) announced on Tuesday.

* US troops will be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of August, ahead of the September 11 deadline imposed by President Joe Biden, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.

* The United States has coordinated the turnover of the Bagram Air Base with Afghan leaders and contacts on the matter occurred two days prior to the pullout, Kirby said.

* The United States will continue discussing supporting operations with countries neighboring Afghanistan after the troop pullout, Kirby said.

BELARUS DEVELOPMENTS

* The Belarussian Foreign Ministry announced that the republic would minimize the diplomatic representation of Lithuania until the latter stops unfriendly initiatives.

* Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said that the government is not ruling out introducing restrictions on the transit of transport via Belarus if the West imposes new sanctions.

RUSSIA'S NEW WINE REGULATIONS

* The European Commission is very concerned about Russia's new law amending wine and spirits legislation and will study whether it violates the World Trade Organization's (WTO) rules as well as possible responses, a Commission spokesperson told Sputnik.

* France is analyzing new Russian law regulating the labeling of champagne, and in the near future intends to discuss the situation with Russia and at the EU level in order to protect the interests of French producers, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said.

* The World Trade Organization (WTO) has not yet formed a position on the dispute over the new Russian norms on alcoholic beverages but is also not aware of any actions by the European Union to bring the relevant issue forward, a WTO spokesperson told Sputnik.

RUSSIA DETAINS ESTONIAN CONSUL

* Estonian consul Mart Latte was detained red-handed in St. Petersburg while receiving materials of a classified nature, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) said on Tuesday.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Russia is not excluding a dialogue with the United States on Russia's latest weapons system if it also includes talks on US' priming hypersonic weapons and other issues, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

* There is a chance to normalize Russia-US relations and it should not be missed, Ryabkov said.

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Dow Jones Suffers Sharpest Loss in 3 Weeks as Oil Prices Plunge

NEW YORK, July 6 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's energy and industrial dominated Dow Jones index suffered its sharpest loss in three weeks on Tuesday as oil prices plunged on concerns about production unity within the OPEC+ cartel, after an initial rally to seven-year highs.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, finished at 34,577, down 209 points or 0.6 percent. The last time the Dow closed down 200 points or more in a day was on June 18. Earlier in Tuesday's session, the Dow fell as much as 400 points to an intraday low of 34,358.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, fell almost 9 points, or 0.2 percent, to close at 4,344. The S&P hit a record high of 4,356 earlier in the session.

The Nasdaq Composite was the outlier among Wall Street's indices, settling up 0.2 percent on the day after hitting record highs too.

Nasdaq, which includes high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, finished up 24 points at 14,664 after hitting an all-time high of 14,687.

US crude oil initially surged to a seven-year high of almost \$78 per barrel Tuesday on concerns of a supply squeeze, after OPEC+ failed to agree on an output hike for August. The market eventually settled at just above \$73 a barrel as oil bulls' jubilation over the OPEC+ outcome turned into worries that the cartel's two senior most members, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, may have reached a breaking point in their relations.

The 23-nation OPEC+ - which bands the 13 original members of the Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries with 10 oil-producing allies steered by Russia - was supposed to have agreed on a hike of at least 400,000 barrels per day for next month.

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Russian Hackers Allegedly Breached US Republican National Committee Last Week – Reports

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – Allegedly Russian hackers related to a criminal group known as APT 29 or Cozy Bear breached the computer systems of the US Republican National

Committee (RNC) last week but the fact has not yet been confirmed by RNC representatives, Bloomberg reported on Tuesday.

The report is so far unconfirmed whether the breach actually took place or any data stolen.

"Microsoft informed us that one of our vendors, Synnex, systems may have been exposed," a spokesman for the RNC Mike Reed said as quoted by Bloomberg. "There is no indication the RNC was hacked or any RNC information was stolen. We are investigating the matter and have informed DHS [Department of Homeland Security] and the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]."

The Cozy Bear hackers were accused by the US authorities for their alleged breaching of the Democratic National Committee as well as for the cyberattack on the SolarWinds systems disclosed in December.

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Canada's Top Diplomat, Tikhanovskaya Discuss Western Sanctions Against Belarus

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau and Belarusian opposition figure Svetlana Tikhanovskaya on Tuesday discussed sanctions imposed by Western countries against Minsk.

"Minister Garneau underscored Canada's support for democracy. He also pointed to Canada's multifaceted support to Belarusian civil society and to recent sanctions, in coordination with the United Kingdom, United States and European Union, to maintain pressure on the Belarusian regime to end its repeated assault on the human rights and dignity of the Belarusian people," Global Affairs Canada said in a readout following the meeting.

Garneau and Tikhanovskaya agreed on the need for an international investigation into alleged human rights violations by Belarusian officials and the two condemned the grounding of a Ryanair flight.

Belarus asserts that it alerted the flight crew to a bomb threat on board. Meanwhile, Western officials maintain that Roman Protasevich, the founder of a Telegram channel which Minsk has designated as an extremist entity, was the target of the alleged staged grounding.

Canada's foreign minister and the opposition also expressed their "hope" for the "the future of Belarusian democratic ambitions."

Tuesday's conversation marked the fourth meeting between Canada's foreign minister and the opposition leader, with former top diplomat Francois-Philippe Champagne participating in the first two engagements.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has repeatedly accused Western nations of direct interference in the internal affairs of Belarus. Russia has also voiced concerns over foreign interference in the neighboring country.

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Airlift Company Agrees to Pay \$11Mln on False Claims to US Govt. – Justice Department

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – The AAR Corporation has agreed to pay \$11 million to the US government to settle false claims allegations about aircraft maintenance services it performed for Transportation Command (TRANSCOM), the Department of Justice said on Tuesday.

"AAR Corp. ... and its subsidiary, AAR Airlift Group, located in Melbourne, Florida, have agreed to pay the United States \$11,088,000 to resolve False Claims Act allegations in connection with aircraft maintenance services performed by Airlift on two TRANSCOM contracts," the department said in a press release.

The allegations involve helicopters that Airlift owned and maintained for use in transporting Department of Defense (DoD) cargo and personnel in support of Department of Defense missions in Afghanistan and Africa, the release explained.

"The settlement resolves allegations that Airlift knowingly failed to maintain nine aircrafts in accordance with contract requirements, and that because of this failure, the helicopters were not airworthy and should not have been certified by Airlift as 'fully mission capable,'" the Justice Department said.

AAR and Airlift have also agreed to pay \$429,273.69 to resolve a separate Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) matter citing deficiencies in Airlift's helicopter maintenance, the Justice Department said.

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US Defense Chief to Discuss With Turkish Counterpart Cooperation in Afghanistan - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - Afghanistan will be on top of the agenda during upcoming telephone talks between US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his Turkish counterpart Hulusi Akar, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"He [Austin] looks forward to speaking to his Turkish counterpart tomorrow. I will not get ahead of the agenda for discussion. But clearly, I think it is safe to assume that Afghanistan will be top on the list," Kirby said during a press briefing.

On Monday, the Afghan president's national security adviser Hamdullah Mohib told Sputnik the Afghan government is working to ensure that Turkey takes over on the Kabul airport security after NATO troops withdraw by early September. Turkey has not yet made a final decision as talks regarding the issue are still ongoing.

In late June, Akar confirmed that the Turkish military was negotiating with the US delegation measures to ensure the security of Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul.

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Pentagon Ready to Consider Mandatory COVID-19 Vaccination of Its Personnel - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - US military leaders are ready to consider the option of making coronavirus vaccination of its personnel mandatory if the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approves the inoculations, US Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Tuesday. "Should the FDA approve it, that I am certain that Pentagon leadership will take a look at what our options are going forward, including the potential option of making mandatory but I am not going to get too far ahead of process right now," Kirby told reporters during a press briefing. Kirby underscored that vaccination remains voluntary since all vaccines currently used in the United States have been authorized by FDA for emergency use only. Last week, Senior Adviser to the Defense Secretary on COVID-19 Max Rose said nearly 70 percent of the US active duty service members have received at least one dose of coronavirus vaccines.

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State Department Confirms US Envoy for North Korea Held Call With Chinese Counterpart

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - State Department spokesperson Ned Price confirmed on Tuesday that US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim recently held a telephone call with his Chinese counterpart Liu Xiaoming. "I can confirm that a call took place," Price said during a press briefing. Price did not provide any details about the call, but said China has a role to play in the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula because of its influence over Pyongyang. The United States has reached out to North Korea to engage in diplomacy and is awaiting a constructive reply, Price said. US-North Korea denuclearization talks stalled after a failed bilateral summit in Hanoi in 2019, when the Trump administration requested more significant steps from North Korea, such as terminating its nuclear arsenal. However, Pyongyang accused the United States of failing to follow through on previous agreements. Last week, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un sent a congratulatory message to Chinese President Xi Jinping on the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party of China, in which he expressed his intention to strengthen strategic relations between the two countries.

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US Puts 8 More Nations on 'Do Not Travel' List Over COVID-19 - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has added eight additional nations that it advises US citizens not to travel to because of concerns about the continuing spread of the coronavirus there, the State Department announced on Tuesday.

"This week, the following Travel Advisories have been assessed and reissued with updates, raised to a Level 4 – Do Not Travel," the State Department said in a media note. "Bhutan, Botswana, Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Rwanda, Sierra Leone [and] South Africa."

Papua New Guinea remains at a Level 4 - "Do Not Travel" designation while Cambodia has been raised to a Level 3 - "Reconsider Travel" designation, the State Department said.

On the other hand, Belgium, Croatia, Estonia, Slovenia and Sri Lanka have been lowered down to a Level 3 designation, the State Department added.

Azerbaijan, Bonaire, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Romania and Slovakia have been lowered to a Level 2 - "Exercise Increased Caution" status while Barbados, Curacao, Dominica and Liechtenstein have been lowered to a Level 1 - "Exercise Normal Precautions," according to the State Department.

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US COVID-19 Funeral Aid Tops Half Billion Dollars - Emergency Management Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – The US continues to accept applications for aid to help defray funeral costs for COVID-19 victims, having already disbursed more than \$500 million, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) said on Tuesday.

"FEMA has provided over \$525 million to more than 78,000 people to assist with COVID-19-related funeral costs for deaths occurring on or after Jan. 20, 2020," a FEMA press release said.

Up to \$9,000 per diseased individual is remains available to defray funeral costs, with a maximum of \$35,000 in cases where an applicant incurred funeral expenses for multiple COVID-19 fatalities, according to FEMA.

Nearly 2,500 FEMA employees continue to accept applications by phone and there is no deadline at present, the agency said.

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US Calls on Parties in Ethiopian Dam Issue to Refrain From Unilateral Action - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The United States calls on Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia to refrain from taking any unilateral action that may raise tensions in the dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"We do call on all parties to refrain from any unilateral action that would raise those tensions, that would put greater distance between where we are now and a peaceful constructive resolution to this," Price said during a press briefing.

Ethiopia has been implementing a large-scale project to build the dam - expected to become Africa's largest hydroelectric power plant - on the Blue Nile since 2011, but Egypt and Sudan fear its effects on their own water security.

On Monday, the Egyptian irrigation ministry said it received notification from the government of Ethiopia that it started to fill the dam, which Cairo rejects and claims is a violation of international law.

After previous rounds of talks previously held by the three nations failed, Sudan sent an official request with the United Nations Security Council on June 22, asking to discuss the matter, which is expected to take place on Thursday.

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US Mobilizing 'COVID-19 Surge Response Teams' Amid Rising Cases among Unvaccinated - Biden

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The US will be mobilizing so-called "COVID-19 Surge Response Teams" to address surges in cases and its new Delta variant in areas of the country with lower vaccination rates, President Joe Biden said on Tuesday.

"We're stepping up our preparations to respond to the outbreaks we're going to see among the unvaccinated. For that, we're mobilizing what I'm calling 'COVID-19 Surge Response Teams.' These teams are made up of experts from FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the CDC, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and elsewhere across our government," Biden said during a briefing at the White House.

The teams will help prevent, detect, and respond to outbreaks of the Delta variant among unvaccinated individuals in states with low vaccination rates. They will deploy testing, medicines, and federal personnel to fill gaps in staffing to help investigate outbreaks.

The effort is part of a larger plan announced by the Biden administration which focuses on getting vaccines to primary care doctors and pediatricians, making vaccines accessible to workers on-site, and expanding mobile clinic efforts.

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US to Continue Talks With Afghanistan's Neighbors About Supporting Operations - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue discussing supporting operations with countries neighboring Afghanistan after the pullout, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby told reporters in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"As you saw we had conversations last week with the foreign ministers of both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan who also met with the State Department as well," Kirby said. "I won't detail the specifics of those conversations, but clearly we are and continue to have conversations with leaders in neighboring nations, about the kinds of possibilities for support that they can offer, with respect to a range of over the horizon capabilities we want to be able to, to bring to bear in our support to the Afghan forces."

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New York Declares Gun Violence Emergency, Passes Law Against Firearms Makers

NEW YORK, July 6 (Sputnik) - The State of New York on Tuesday declared a state of emergency against gun violence similar to the coronavirus pandemic, with Governor Andrew Cuomo also signing into law a bill where firearms makers can be sued for being a public nuisance.

"I want you to understand the extent of the problem. I want you to understand how serious this is," Cuomo said in a live-telecast broadcast as he announced the emergency against rampant and mass shootings in the state that had claimed mostly young lives. "We want to do with gun violence what we did with COVID."

Cuomo also signed before cameras a bill that would reinstate a public nuisance liability against gun manufacturers to make them liable to civil suits for injuries and deaths suffered by both individuals and the state from shootings.

"This is going to be a very big deal," Cuomo said, adding that the law was originally scuttled in 2000 by then-President George Bush, who signed an enactment that virtually gave gun manufacturers immunity against any civil suits related to shootings.

Cuomo's action against gun violence comes as current President Joe Biden called for a national crime prevention policy to cut down on shootings.

Cuomo said more people died from shootings in New York over the July 4th weekend than of COVID-19: 51 shooting deaths compared to 13 deaths from the disease.

Gun violence in New York has surged even as other crimes such as rape, robbery and larceny at their lowest since at least 2015, data showed.

Nationally, deaths from shootings are up 18 percent year-over-year in major US cities, and that's after 2020 brought the largest single-year increase ever recorded, according to data.

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US Extends Yemenis Temporary Protected Status Through March 2023 - Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – Secretary for Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas has extended temporary protected status for Yemenis in the United States through March 2023, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced on Tuesday.

"Today, Secretary of Homeland Security... Mayorkas announced an 18-month extension and re-designation of Yemen for Temporary Protected Status (TPS)," the DHS said in a press release. "This extension and re-designation will be in effect from September 4, 2021, through March 3, 2023."

Mayorkas decided to extend Yemen for TPS after consulting with interagency partners and considering the ongoing armed conflict there, including lack of access to food, water, and healthcare, the DHS said.

"Yemen continues to experience worsening humanitarian and economic conditions that prevent individuals from safely returning to their homes. ... We will continue to protect and offer these individuals a place of residency temporarily in the United States," Mayorkas said

In addition to the years-long internal strife, Yemen continues to suffer from large-scale destruction of its infrastructure, significant population displacement, an ongoing cholera outbreak since 2016 and the COVID-19 pandemic's worsening of the country's dire economic and humanitarian situation, the DHS explained.

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Biden Briefed on Latest Cyber Attack, Says Incident Caused Minimal Damage to US Businesses

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he has been updated on the recent ransomware attack against the IT management software company Kaseya by the Russia-linked REvil hacking group, and there appears to be minimal damage to US businesses.

"I received an update from my national security team this morning. It appears to have caused minimal damage to US businesses, but we're still gathering information for the full extent of the attack, and I'm going to have more to say about this in the next several days," Biden said during a briefing at the White House.

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US Has No Intention to Normalize Ties With Syrian Govt - State Department

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The administration of Joe Biden has no intention to normalize the relations with the Syrian government led by Bashar Assad, the US State Department spokesman Ned Price said at a briefing Tuesday.

"This administration has no intention at present at normalizing relations with the Assad regime," Price said.

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US Troops to Be Out of Afghanistan by End of August

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - US troops will be withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of next month, which is a little ahead of the September 11 deadline laid out by President Joe Biden, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby told reporters in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"The drawdown continues... We expect it to be complete by the end of August," Kirby said. "The withdrawal is on pace, and we will be out by the end of August, which is slightly ahead of what the President's original direction was."

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US Releases Artist's Rendering of Planned B-21 Stealth Nuclear Bomber - Air Force

WASHINGTON, June 6 (Sputnik) - The US military published an image of the nuclear-capable B-21 stealth bomber now under development, a futuristic weapon intended to fly with or without human pilots, the Air Force said on Tuesday.

"Designed to perform long range conventional and nuclear missions and to operate in tomorrow's high end threat environment, the B-21 will be a visible and flexible component of the nuclear triad," an Air Force press release with an artist's rendering said.

The wedge shaped aircraft topped with a slat window hump and no visible means of propulsion resembles the B-2 bomber, which the B-21 is intended to replace.

"The B-21 Raider will be a component of a larger family of systems for conventional Long Range Strike, including Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance, electronic attack,

communication and other capabilities. It will be nuclear capable and designed to accommodate manned or unmanned operations," an accompanying Air Force fact sheet said.

The Air Force plans to incrementally replace the B-1 and B-2 bombers to form a two bomber fleet of B-21s and modified B-52s.

The B-21 is slated to become operational in the mid-2020s, the Air Force said.

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Pentagon Says Coordinated Bagram Air Base Turnover With Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The United States has coordinated the turnover of the Bagram Air Base with Afghan leaders, and contacts occurred some two days prior to the pullout, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby told reporters in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"There was coordination with Afghan leaders, both in the government as well as in the Afghan Security Forces about the eventual turnover of Bagram Air Base," Kirby said, adding that it was seventh and final base which was turned over.

"Afghan leaders - civilian and military - were appropriately coordinated with and briefed about the turnover of Bagram Air Base. In fact, some of that, some of that briefing included a walkthrough of facilities on the base with senior Afghan leaders... The specific conversation and coordination about the turnover of Bagram, the final conversations occurred at 48 hours prior."

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US Says Iran's Move to Produce Uranium Metal Enriched Up to 20% 'Worrying'

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The decision of Iran to produce uranium metal enriched up to 20% is "worrying," US State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"We've seen media reports that characterize this document [on enrichment]. It is worrying that Iran is choosing to continue to escalate," the spokesman said.

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New York to Reinstate Public Nuisance Liability for Gun Manufacturers - Governor Cuomo

NEW YORK CITY, July 6 (Sputnik) - The State of New York is going to reinstate a public nuisance liability for gun manufacturers as part of efforts to make firearms makers accountable for rampant and mass shootings, Governor Andrew Cuomo said Tuesday.

"New York is going to sign a law today that reinstates the public nuisance liability for gun manufacturers," Cuomo said in a live-telecast announcement where he declared a disaster emergency against gun violence in the state. "This is going to be a very big deal."

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New York Declares Disaster Emergency on Gun Violence After Deadly Shootings - Governor

NEW YORK CITY, July 6 (Sputnik) - The State of New York on Tuesday became the first in the United States to declare a state of disaster emergency OVER gun violence, with Governor Andrew Cuomo saying he was putting the crisis involving rampant shootings in parallel with the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I want you to understand the extent of the problem. I want you to understand how serious this is," Cuomo said in a live-telecast announcement as he cited data on shootings in the state that had claimed mostly young lives. "We want to do with gun violence what we did with COVID."

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Saudi Deputy Defense Minister to Meet Senior US Officials in Washington Today - Psaki

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman is set to meet with senior US officials in Washington, DC today to discuss various matters including, possibly, the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Tuesday.

"Saudi Arabia's Deputy Defense Minister will meet or is meeting with, I should say, Biden administration officials today, including National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan," Psaki said. "He is scheduled to meet with State and Defense Department officials as well."

Psaki noted that During the meeting, they'll discuss the relations partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia, regional security and the US commitment to help Saudi Arabia defend its territory.

The spokesperson also noted that the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi could be discussed.

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US to Provide 3.5Mln Coronavirus Vaccines to Guatemala, Vietnam This Week - White House

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide Guatemala and Vietnam a total of 3.5 million doses of coronavirus vaccines this week, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"This week, both Guatemala and Vietnam will be receiving COVID-19 vaccine doses from the Biden-Harris administration. Guatemala will receive 1.5 million doses of Moderna, and Vietnam will receive 2 million doses of Moderna," Psaki said.

The shipments are part of an ongoing effort by the Biden administration to deliver 80 million vaccine doses to countries around the world.

Psaki said the vaccines are allocated on the basis of availability and the fact that there is a higher percentage of Moderna vaccines in the United States.

However, Psaki acknowledged there are logistical challenges that concern legal and regulatory barriers as well as distribution and transportation, but noted that the countries are getting better at preparing to obtain and administer the vaccines.

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Pentagon Scraps JEDI Cloud Contract Disputed Between Microsoft, Amazon

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration has scrapped its proposed \$10 billion competition originally between Microsoft and Amazon to produce a gigantic Cloud system for the entire armed forces, the Department of Defense announced on Tuesday.

"Today, the Department of Defense canceled the Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure (JEDI) Cloud solicitation and initiated contract termination procedures," the Defense Department said in a press release.

The department has determined that due to evolving requirements and industry advances, the JEDI Cloud contract no longer meets its needs, the release explained. JEDI was developed when Pentagon needs were different and CSPs technology and cloud technology was less mature, it said.

"...(O)ur landscape has advanced and a new way-ahead is warranted to achieve dominance in both traditional and non-traditional warfighting domains," acting Defense Department Chief Information Officer John Sherman said in the release.

The Department continues to have unmet cloud capability gaps for enterprise-wide, commercial cloud services and these needs have only advanced in recent years with efforts such as Joint All Domain Command and Control (JADC2) and the Artificial Intelligence and Data Acceleration (ADA) initiative, the release noted.

The Defense Department now intends to seek proposals from Microsoft and Amazon Web Services (AWS), as available market research indicates that these two vendors are the only Cloud Service Providers (CSPs) capable of meeting its requirements, the release stated.

Microsoft was awarded the earlier contract in 2019 but Amazon filed a lawsuit arguing that then-President Donald Trump was biased against the company because of his repeated clashes with its CEO and founder Jeff Bezos, who also owns the Washington Post newspaper.

In 2020, the Defense Department Inspector-General concluded in a report that the awarding of the contract had not been influenced by the Trump White House.

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Three in 5 US Voters Believe Government Spies on Journalists, Political Opponents - Poll

WASHINGTON, June 6 (Sputnik) - Nearly 60 percent of likely US voters believe the government secretly collects information on journalists and political opponents, a Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Tuesday.

"[Fifty-nine percent] 59% of Likely US Voters believe it is at least somewhat likely that the US government spies on critical journalists and political opponents, including 36 percent who think it's very likely," a press release explaining the poll said.

Suspicion of government snooping is especially pronounced among younger voters, with 72 percent under age 40 believing that it is "somewhat likely" the government has its opponents and journalists under surveillance compared with to 56 percent of those age 40-64 and 46 percent of voters 65 and older, the release said.

Significantly more Republicans (44 percent) than Democrats (25 percent) or unaffiliated voters (38 percent) now consider such surveillance "very likely," however more Democrats than Republicans suspected government snooping during the Trump administration, the release added.

The survey of 1,000 US likely voters was conducted on June 30-July 1 with a sampling error margin of plus or minus three percentage points and a 95 percent confidence level.

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Biden to Convene US Interagency Officials to Discuss Ransomware Wednesday - White House

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will convene officials from across the US government on Wednesday to discuss the issue of ransomware attacks and the strategic efforts to address such attacks, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

"Tomorrow, the President will convene key leaders... including the State Department, Department of Justice, DHS [Department of Homeland Security] and other members of the intelligence community to discuss ransomware and our overall strategic efforts to counter it," Psaki said on Tuesday.

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US Closely Monitors OPEC+ Negotiations, Holds Talks With Saudi Arabia, UAE - White House

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is closely monitoring the ongoing Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) Plus group negotiations and has held high-level talks with Saudi and United Arab Emirates (UAE) senior officials, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Tuesday.

"We are closely monitoring the OPEC Plus negotiations and their impact on the global economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic... We are not a party to these talks, but over the weekend and into this week we've had a number of high-level conversations with officials in Saudi Arabi and the UAE and other relevant partners. We're encouraged by the ongoing conversation by OPEC members to reaching an agreement," Psaki said.

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US Officials to Meet With Russian Counterparts Next Week on Ransomware Attacks - Psaki
WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - US officials will meet with their Russian counterparts next week for expert-level talks on ransomware attacks, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Tuesday.

"Since the meeting between President [Joe] Biden and President [Vladimir] Putin, we have undertaken expert-level talks that are continuing and we expect to have another meeting next week focused on ransomware attacks," Psaki said.

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US Presses Ethiopia Government to Accept Indefinite Ceasefire in Tigray - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken sought a commitment from Ethiopia Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to an immediate ceasefire and withdrawal of government forces from the Tigray region and accountability for those responsible for atrocities in eight months of fighting, the State Department said in a readout of a conversation on Tuesday.

"Secretary Blinken urged Prime Minister Abiy to commit to the steps outlined in the United Nations Security Council on July 2, including the complete withdrawal of Eritrean and Amhara forces from Tigray; full, safe, and unhindered humanitarian access to populations in need; the establishment of a transparent process to hold accountable those responsible for human rights abuses and atrocities; and an affirmation that neither the internal nor external borders of Ethiopia will be changed by force or in contravention of the constitution," the readout said. Blinken also emphasized the urgency of holding an inclusive political dialogue to begin the difficult work of forging a lasting resolution to the Ethiopia's ethnic and political divisions, the readout added.

Clashes in the province of Tigray erupted in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party - the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) - of ambushing a regional

army post to hijack weapons and arm anti-government militia. The Tigray region has been occupied by the Ethiopian military since then, resulting in fighting with the rebels. An estimated 2 million of Tigray's 6 million people are reported to have fled their homes and an estimated 900,000 people likely face famine as a result of the occupation. The TPLF represents a party that for dominated Ethiopia's government for three decades until Abiy, a member of the rival Oromo ethnic group, came to power in 2018.

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Delta Variant Spreading Across Canada, Majority of New Cases in Ontario - Top Doctor

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – The Delta variant of the coronavirus continues to spread across Canada and is now responsible for the majority of new cases in the province of Ontario, Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said on Tuesday.

"The Delta variant continues to increase and now accounts for the majority of current COVID-19 cases in other areas, such as in Ontario," Tam said in a statement.

To date, Canada has recorded 4,752 Delta variant cases, according to data from the country's public health agency.

The Delta strain, first identified in India, has been spreading rapidly with EU health officials warning that the variant could account for 90% of the bloc's cases by late August. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), all the vaccines that it has approved are effective at preventing severe disease and death caused by the Delta variant of the coronavirus.

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Watchdog Says FBI Agents Made Unauthorized \$2Mln Buy of Intellectual Property in Operation

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The Justice Department's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) said on Tuesday it found three FBI agents were involved in misconduct for participating in an unauthorized \$2-million purchase of intellectual property related to a classified undercover operation.

"The OIG investigation substantiated the allegation that the then Special Agent in Charge (SAC) and two then Assistant Special Agents in Charge (ASACs) of the field division participated in the \$2 million purchase of intellectual property related to a classified undercover operation without the authority to do so," the OIG said in a press release. "The OIG found that these actions were a violation of FBI policy."

The OIG said the incident occurred in 2014 but did not provide any additional information related to the classified undercover operation.

The Special Agent in Charge deliberately falsified a funding request for the operation and the two other assistance Special Agents in Charge did not provide accurate cash-on-hand figures

related to the operation in order to obtain the \$2 million for the unauthorized purchase of intellectual property, the release said.

The Special Agent in Charge and one of the Assistant Special Agents in Charge retired, the other agent resigned, the release said. The OIG has provided the FBI with a classified report about the incident so the agency can take appropriate action, the release added.

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UN Concerned by Belarus' Sentence to Lukashenko's Challenger Babariko - Spokesman UNITED NATIONS, July 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is concerned by the sentencing of Belarusian ex-presidential candidate Viktor Babariko to 14 years in prison, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press bringing on Tuesday.

"We've seen these reports, which are concerning," Dujarric said when asked about the sentencing. "We would want to reiterate our call for an open dialogue between the various political forces in Belarus."

The Belarusian Supreme Court on Tuesday sentenced Viktor Babariko, the former chairman of the board of Belgazprombank, to 14 years in prison over charges of financial crimes.

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US' Largest Military Shipbuilder Huntington Ingalls to Acquire Defense Contractor Alion

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - Huntington Ingalls Industries, the largest military shipbuilding company in the US, is set to acquire the Department of Defense contractor Alion Science and Technology as part of an expansion of their national security solutions portfolio, the company announced on Tuesday.

"Huntington Ingalls Industries (NYSE:HII) announced today that it has entered into a definitive agreement to acquire Alion Science and Technology for \$1.65 billion in cash from Veritas Capital, subject to customary adjustments. Alion is a high value-added, technology-driven solutions provider for the global defense marketplace," the company said in a press release.

They added that they plan on integrating Alion into Huntington Ingalls Industries' Technical Solutions division and that they anticipate the transaction to close in the latter half of 2021. Alion provides advanced engineering, research, and development for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems, military training and simulation, cyber, data analytics and other next-generation technologies for the military and intelligence communities. The US Navy currently represents about one-third of the company's annual revenues.

Huntington Ingalls said that the acquisition is a 'compelling strategic fit' for the company, with Alion's capabilities and customer access aligning with their own, in particular, highlighting Alion's strength in enabling and supporting naval simulations.

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Russia's Yandex to Partner With Grubhub, US Colleges on Robot Food Order Deliveries

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The Russian tech company Yandex announced on Tuesday that it is partnering with the food delivery company Grubhub and select colleges in the United States to deploy autonomous delivery robots in areas that are accessible only by foot.

"We chose to partner with Grubhub for campus delivery because of Grubhub's unparalleled reach into college campuses across the United States, as well as the flexibility and strength of their ordering platform," Yandex Self-Driving Group head Dmitry Polishchuk said.

Polishchuk explained that Yandex seeks to deploy dozens of such robots and actively commercialize its self-driving technology in different markets across the world.

Yandex has said its robots can access areas that cars can not and are capable of operating in pedestrian and school campus areas that are usually inaccessible to delivery drivers. Users receive a notification on Grubhub's application when their meal is approaching and are able to open the robot's hatch and claim the food by using the application.

The robots have been used commercially in Russia since 2020 to deliver orders from restaurants and grocery stores via Yandex's own platforms as well as to deliver orders from local restaurants in Ann Arbor, Michigan, since April.

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Trudeau Appoints Mary Simon as Canada's First Indigenous Representative of Queen

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Tuesday announced the appointment of Mary Simon as the country's first indigenous Governor General, the Queen's representative in Canada.

Simon takes on the role months after ex-Governor General, Julie Payette, resignation over allegations of widespread harassment of employees at Rideau Hall - the Monarch or its representative's residence in Ottawa - by Payette and her secretary, Assunta Di Lorenzo.

"This morning, I can announce that on my recommendation Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II has approved the appointment of Mary Simon as the 30th Governor General of Canada," Trudeau said during a press briefing in Gatineau, Quebec.

Simon, who enters the role amid frayed Canada-Indigenous relations following the discoveries of hundreds of unmarked graves at the sites of former forced assimilation schools, said she was excited to take on the role to help mend the nation-to-nation relationships and foster greater understanding between different groups of Canadians.

Simon said the role is apolitical and she will use it to set a constructive example for Canada.

Simon also said that she is committed to "setting and maintaining the highest standards of work ethics" at Rideau Hall.

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US Withdrawal From Afghanistan 90% Complete - Central Command

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan is now 90 percent complete, the Central Command (CENTCOM) announced on Tuesday.

"The withdrawal process continues; US Central Command estimates that we have completed more than 90 percent of the entire withdrawal process," it said.

CENTCOM added that the US military also has handed over nearly 17,074 pieces of equipment to the Defense Logistics Agency for disposition.

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Death Toll in Florida Condo Collapse Rises to 32, 113 Still Missing - Mayor

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – The number of victims in the apartment building collapse in Surfside, Florida has reached 32 as four more bodies have been recovered overnight with 113 individuals still unaccounted for, the mayor of Miami-Dade county Daniella Levine Cava said on Tuesday.

"We have recovered four additional victims. The number of confirmed deaths is now 32, with 26 of those identified. 191 People are accounted for and we have 113 reports of people who are potentially unaccounted for," Cava said during a press briefing.

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US Fossil Fuel Use Suffered Record Annual Decline in 2020 - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – The US experienced the largest annual decline in fossil fuel consumption since the government began keeping records in the late 1940s, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said in an annual report released on Tuesday.

"Last year marked the largest annual decrease in U.S. fossil fuel consumption in both absolute and percentage terms since at least 1949, the earliest year in our annual data series," the report said.

Mitigation measures at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 lead to a 15 percent decrease in energy consumption in the US transportation sector The United States also had relatively warmer weather in 2020, which reduced demand for heating fuels, the report added.

A 9 percent drop in use of petroleum, natural gas and coal last year resulted in total fossil fuel consumption of 72.9 quadrillion British thermal units (Btu), the lowest level in absolute terms since 1991, according to the report.

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US, China Can Live in Peace, 'Enormous' Challenge Will Remain – White House Official
WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – The United States and China can coexist and live in peace while enormous challenges in relations will remain for generations ahead with periods of raised tensions, White House Policy Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell said on Tuesday. "The challenge ahead will be to come up with a strategy that presents China opportunities but also very clear challenges for taking steps that are antithetical to the maintenance of peace and stability," Campbell said during a conversation with the Asia Society non-profit. "Do I think it is possible that the United States and China can coexist and live in peace. Yes, I do. But I do think the challenge is going to be enormously difficult for this generation and the next." The challenge of finding the right approach to China will take significant amount of time with occasional periods of uncertainty and raised tensions, the official noted. Campbell has characterized the former US President Donald Trump's exclusively bilateral approach to China as "erratic" and noted that the right way to deal with Beijing should be based on the engagement of international community to support peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

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Capitol Police to Probe Threats to Congress Members in California, Florida

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – The US Capitol Police (USCP) is opening field offices in the populous states of California and Florida to investigate threats to members of Congress following the January 6 Capitol riot, the organization announced on Tuesday. "The Department is ...in the process of opening Regional Field Offices in California and Florida with additional regions in the near future to investigate threats to Members of Congress," the USCP said in a press release.. The police department has also "solidified" its new Critical Incident Response Plan, which establishes a multi-phase action plan to quickly mobilize local, state, and federal manpower, including the Department of Defense, to respond to emergencies, the organization added. "It is also working with Congressional oversight and the Capitol Police Board to obtain the authority to immediately request National Guard assistance if needed without having to wait for board approval," the USCP said

The Capitol Police's Civil Disturbance Unit has increased training, to include joint training with the National Guard and riot training and it is increasing its use of force, tactical, equipment, leadership, and incident command training, the release added.

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US Has Strong Unofficial Ties With Taiwan, Does Not Support Independence - White House
WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – The US maintains a strong unofficial relationship with Taiwan but does not support its independence from China and would welcome the country playing a more prominent international role, White House Policy Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell said on Tuesday.

"We support a strong unofficial relationship with Taiwan. We do not support Taiwan independence. We fully recognize them and understand the sensitivities involved here. We do believe that Taiwan has a right to live in peace. We want to see its international role, particularly in areas like vaccines and issues associated with the pandemic. They [Taiwan] should have a role to play here. They should not be shunned in the international community," Campbell said during a conversation with Asia Society, a non-profit organization.

Campbell has also warned that China's efforts to undertake similar steps it had made in Hong Kong with respect to Taiwan would be "catastrophic" while the US with its international partners will continue signaling "accordingly" to Beijing in case its steps are completely antithetical to international order.

Taiwan has been governed independently from mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province, while Taiwan — a territory with its own democratically elected government — maintains that it is an autonomous country and has political and economic relations with several other nations that recognize its sovereignty. Beijing vociferously denies its independence as it sees itself as the only legitimate political representative of the Chinese people anywhere.

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US Urges States to Apply For \$600Mln in Aid For Homeless Students - Education Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration invited individual states to apply for an additional \$600 million from the American Rescue Plan to aid students experiencing homelessness, the Education Department said on Tuesday.

"In April, the Department released the first \$200 million of the \$800 million in ARP-HCY [American Rescue Plan - Homeless Children and Youth] funds to states. The distribution of the additional \$600 million will give states and school districts access to funding before the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year," a department press release said.

ARP-HCY refers to the Homeless Children and Youth Fund earmark in the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 focused American Rescue Plan Act.

"I encourage every state to urgently use these American Rescue Plan funds to support homeless children and youth so that these students have every chance to participate in summer learning and enrichment; experience full-time, in-person instruction in their schools in the fall; and get connected to vital services and supports that can support their success," Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said in the release.

The release noted that the shift by schools to remote learning during the pandemic disproportionately impacted homeless students due to limited internet access.

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Biden to Host Australian, Indian, Japanese Leaders Later This Year - White House

WASHINGTON, July 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will host the leaders of Australia, India and Japan later this year, White House Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell said on Tuesday.

"You will see [our cooperation] later this year when the president [Biden] hosts the Quad leaders in Washington. You'll see some commitments," Campbell said at an online event hosted by the Asia Society group.

He added that the summit should bring "decisive" commitments on such issues as vaccine diplomacy and infrastructure.

The Quad, also known as Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is a strategic dialogue between the US, Japan, Australia and India during which the sides discuss economic and military cooperation. Its first inklings go back to 2007 but a recent resurgence is largely seen as a strategy to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region.